

Remarks of Dawn Renfrew
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee
February 27, 2008

Good Afternoon, Members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee and Education Committee. My name is Dawn Marie Renfrew, I live in Barkhamsted, and I am a Health/Physical Education Teacher at WAMOGO Regional High School, which is part of Regional School District #6. I am here today to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program.

I have been a mentor in the BEST program for over 15 years, and happen to work in a school district that does a wonderful job supporting both the mentor and the beginning teacher. In that time, I have had the opportunity to work with three beginning teachers. Two teachers were in my area of expertise, while the third was in the area of Fine Arts. While I felt I helped the fine arts teacher to the best of my ability, that experience illustrates a major point: All beginning teachers should have a mentor who teaches in the same academic area. When you are working to mentor outside your area of expertise, you may not be keying into different aspects of teaching that are pertinent to the field of the beginning teacher. This may put them at a disadvantage.

In any setting, being a mentor requires a great deal of time, and a mentor needs to be available to work with the beginning teacher during the day; outside time is often necessary to deal with issues at hand. Having had a beginning teacher who was teaching in two different buildings within the district, we had to be creative with ways to work on best meeting his needs. This was not, by far, the best situation, but we made it work. Another one of the teachers I assisted was from another school district, and needed someone in her field to look over her portfolio, and make necessary suggestions. Again, time was a major factor in our ability to work together.

In a Regional School District, we are educating students from feeder towns, as well as

tuition students from other school districts. In a perfect world, all students would be motivated to be the best students they can be. This is not always the case. A new teacher may have difficulty learning how to deal with the difficult student, which can best be remedied by having an experienced colleague work with him in the classroom. Overall classroom management is always an issue, no matter if you are teaching in a rural, suburban or urban setting. New teachers need to learn their district's curriculum, ways of handling administrative tasks that are part of the job, and are often expected to take on extra-curricular activities or school or committee work. In addition, the mentor needs to meet with the beginning teacher on a regular basis, analyzing units of instruction, teaching strategies, and ways to work with diverse students that will help them become successful. Having a reduced teaching load would enable mentors to work directly in the classroom with the beginning teachers, creating a smoother transition into the first and second year of teaching. Intensive support will help retain new teachers, reducing the percentage of those who leave the profession within the first five years of teaching due to burn-out.

Being an effective mentor also requires training, which should take place within the context of the school day. A mentor should have updated training periodically to provide our new teachers with the most accurate information, thus making their transition into education easier and less stressful. It would be beneficial for a mentor and, most importantly, the new teacher, for mentor training to be content-specific.

I urge you to support the BEST recommendations that would change induction in CT and focus on mentoring and supporting new teachers. By shifting the focus from assessment to mentoring, we'll provide new teachers with the support that will help them to grow more quickly, and encourage them to remain in the profession.